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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the perceptions of female international graduate students from non-European countries of their adjustment experiences while studying at an urban research university, identifying coping strategies they used to overcome their problems. Data collection involved focus group interviews that emphasized: why they chose to pursue graduate education at the university; what their experiences had been; their most difficult adjustment problems; how they coped with the problems; and what they thought the university could do to help them with these problems. Common themes that emerged from the data were decision making, language, discrimination, ignorance, coping strategies, and future suggestions. Most women came to the United States because their aspirations had reached a level that could not be satisfied by local opportunities. Problems students encountered included lack of English proficiency, discrimination, and Americans' lack of knowledge about other cultures and countries. Participants coped with problems by finding out which systems worked best for them, then using them to handle their situations. The students wanted their institutions to help facilitate adjustment by focusing on interaction between American and foreign students, discussion forums for international students to share their experiences, and faculty members' understanding of international students' limitations. (Contains 63 references.) (SM)

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Running head: INTERNATIONAL FEMALE GRADUATE STUDENTS

International Female Graduate Students' Perceptions of Their Adjustment Experiences and Coping Strategies at an Urban Research University

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Abstract

The number of international graduate students in the higher educational institutions of the United States has increased significantly in the recent years. Accordingly international female graduate students have also become a substantial presence on many campuses and in some fields that have traditionally been male dominated. The experiences of these female graduate students may differ from that of their male counterpart in many ways. But in all cases, these women have one thing in common. They have to adjust to life in the United States at different levels, such as, cultural, social, psychological, and academic. The purpose of this study is to investigate international female graduate students' perceptions of their adjustment experiences studying at an urban research university. It will also identify the coping strategies used by these students in order to overcome the problems they encounter.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The pursuit of learning beyond the boundaries of one's own community, nation, or culture is as old as learning itself. In the United States at the close of the nineteenth century and especially in the first three decades of the twentieth century, due to the efforts of philanthropical interests, the number of international students in American educational institutions became greatly enlarged (Du Bois, 1956). Every year the number of foreign students in the United States are increasing. Today 457,984 international students, which is one third of total international students in the world, are enrolled at the higher educational institutions in America (Davis, 1997). Consequently the subject of international students has become a significant endeavor at the institutions of higher education in the United States.

Although international graduate students are more likely to be male than female, the proportion of female international students has become a substantial presence on many campuses in the United States. The Open Doors (Report on International Educational Exchange) data reports that 37.6% of all international graduate students studying in 1997 in the United States are women (Davis, 1997). Every year the proportion of female graduate students is rising steadily. Consequently the subject of international female graduate students has become a significant endeavor at the institutions of higher education in the United States of America. At the same time the subject of international female graduate students is also a subject about which there are striking gaps in our knowledge. Unfortunately the steadily increasing number of international female graduate students has not resulted in much general knowledge about the experiences of international female graduate students studying in the higher educational institutions of America.

Little knowledge is held about the problems faced by these international female graduate students after they come to the United States to study in graduate schools and how these international female graduate students deal with their problems.

Despite the increased number of female international graduate students enrolled in the institutions of higher education in the United States, it is very surprising that there has not been much research done to explore the issue of international female graduate students' experiences during their sojourn in the United States. Research indicates that international students, in general, studying in the United States experience a variety of problems with which they must learn to cope (Akpan-Iquot, 1980; Meloni, 1986; Penderson, 1991). Studies revealed that the biggest challenge the general international students confronted in a foreign setting was adapting to a new environment (Dodge, 1990; Du Bois, 1956; Gezi, 1965; Kohl, 1979). Many international students experience "culture shock", a well-known term used to describe the feelings of frustration and anxiety that arose when familiar culture cues are suddenly removed and replaced by new and sometimes seemingly bizarre behaviors (Briggs & Harvard, 1983; Foust et al., 1981). None of these studies addressed the sex-role differences of international students. Porter (cited in Lee et al. 1981) found that international female students reported having more problems than their male counterparts. Mallinckrodt & Leong (1992) also found that female international graduate students encountered more problems socially, psychologically, and educationally than international male graduate students. What remains to be explored is what are the problems female international students face in graduate school. A thorough understanding of the problems encountered by these international female graduate students and their ways of handling those problems may lead to more successful ways of dealing with them and also help them in their own adjustments.

Personally, as an international female graduate student studying at an urban research university, I have experienced various problems which I found socially, culturally, and educationally and had to adjust accordingly in order to live and to be able to accomplish my goals. Some of these problems could be similar to those of other female international graduate students, but some could be different and unique to myself due to my special background. Learning more about international female graduate students' experiences during their studying at the higher educational institutions of America can provide the background information necessary to increase the understanding about the problems these female international graduate students face in order to pursue their graduate studies. Hence, the purpose of this study was to develop an understanding of the problems faced by international female graduate students and how they handle such problems.

The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate international women graduate students' perception of their adjustment experiences and coping strategies studying at an urban research university. The result of this study may help the female international graduate students who are already in the United States and who plan to come to the United States to adapt to a foreign environment. The result can also inform policy-makers, educational administrators, and professors about the problems that international female graduate students encounter and hence assist them with their policy-making, curriculum development, and program design.

Grand Tour Question and Probing Questions

The grand tour question of the study was simply "*What do international female graduate students perceive as their adjustment problems when they come to study in the higher*

educational institutions of the United States of America"?

Other research questions that guided the process of the study was:

(1) Why do international female graduate students choose to pursue graduate education in the United States?

(2) What coping strategies do international female graduate students use to handle their adjustment problems during their stay in the United States?

(3) What suggestions do international female graduate students have for the higher educational institutions of America to facilitate their adjustment problems during their stay in the United States?

Definitions

International Student. In this study, an international student is defined as anyone who is enrolled in courses at institutions of higher education in the United States of America who is neither a U.S. citizen nor an immigrant (permanent resident) or a refugee. International students are also called "foreign students" or "overseas students". The vast majority of international students (86%) hold F visas (Davis, 1997). F visa is a student visa granted to a bona fide student who satisfies requirements for pursuing a full program of study and who enter the United States for a temporary stay and solely to study. Students with J visas make up the second largest group, accounting for 6.7% (Davis, 1997). J visa is a temporary exchange visitor visa granted for a variety of educational purposes to students, trainees, teachers, professors, research scholars, international visitors or professional trainees. Others type of visas, H visas and M visas, are held by 6.5% of international students. M visas are issued to students enrolled in a vocational training course, other than English language training, in the United States whereas the H visa is a

temporary visa given to persons of extraordinary ability of workers of distinguished merit and ability of workers performing services unavailable in the United States. In this paper, I used the terms "international students" as well as "foreign students" interchangeably to refer the same group of people.

Adjustment. According to Foust et al. (1981), the concept of "adjustment" implied change. In cross-cultural adjustment, one is concerned with the changes in thinking and behavior when required when moving from one culture milieu to another.

Delimitations and Limitations of the Study

One limitation of this study is that the sample of this study was very small: therefore, the findings can not be generalizable to all international female graduate student. One delimitation of the study is that the participants of this study came from different countries, they were of different ages, different marital status, different academic majors, different length of stay.

Significance of the Study

Research reporting the problems experienced by international graduate students in general indicates that not all international students have positive experiences in their pursuit of higher education abroad. The gender differences found in many studies point to a potential situation of double jeopardy for international female graduate students. These female international graduate students may suffer from particular problems of being international graduate students or being female graduate students. While acknowledging that all international female graduate students suffer at sometime from unique adjustment problems, there is much that institutions can do to provide support and advice. Higher educational institutions are in great need of accumulating knowledge regarding the adjustment problems of their international female graduate students so

that they can provide adequate support and guidance to assist international female graduate students to finish their programs successfully. It is also the responsibility of the faculty and administrators to identify the problems of international female graduate students at the beginning of their programs to try to divert potential problems. This study may also help the faculty and administrators to provide coping mechanisms to facilitate international female graduate students' adjustment problems and for institutions to implement.

Chapter 2

A Review Of the Literature

The purpose of this chapter is to present a review of literature. Three major areas of the literature on international female graduate students will be reviewed in this chapter: 1) Graduate student experiences 2) Female graduate students' experiences, and 3) International students' adjustment experiences. References are made to studies that have been conducted on the experiences of American female as graduate student and on the problems international students encounter as they study at U.S. colleges and universities.

Graduate Students' Experiences

Graduate education has been described as a process of socialization to an ultimate professional role (Baird, 1990; Isaac et al., 1992; Stein & Weidmen, 1990) that involves learning the "specialized knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, norms, and interests of profession" (Bragg, 1976, p. 1). It has been assumed that because graduate students have completed undergraduate degrees, they have developed to the point where they can handle the new responsibilities of graduate study on their own. Yet the experiences during graduate school can be overwhelming. Baird (1995) stated that in order to be successful in graduate school, all students need to go through certain steps; they need to understand the structure of the field, to become acquainted with the language and approach of the field, to get familiar with the people and emphases of the program, to find a group of peers, to find an appropriate faculty sponsor, and obtain sufficient financial assistance. These graduate students also must deal with specifics of the program and university requirements. A study conducted by Globetti et al. (1991) indicates that today's graduate student population is increasingly diverse, especially in terms of international students

and women. The purpose of this study was to examine the perceived needs of graduate students at a public university located in the deep south. The sample included 122 graduate students which included 37 international graduate students. Among the sample 66 were males and 56 were females which represented approximately five percent of the total number of graduate students enrolled at the university at the time of the survey. The findings of this study also suggest that goals and needs of graduate students are predominantly personal in nature. However, the more general needs of graduate students reported in this research is to learn more about different areas of career development such as job opportunities in their career area of interest, job seeking skills, and obtaining job experiences in their career areas. Graduate students in this study also desired help with financial resources. They need help in obtaining adequate funds to finance their education, and they desire assistance in learning more about other sources of financial aid available.

It is interesting to note that graduate students in this study expressed a need for help in developing their public speaking ability and writing skills. These needs may reflect the circumstances of the relatively large international student population among the surveyed students (29.2%). However, it is not surprising that graduate students in this study disclosed the need for help in learning how to handle stress and anxiety. Graduate level study is typically stressful, and the experiences of being graduate students generates many anxieties.

Female Graduate Students' Experiences

For women, to pursue graduate education reflects their desire for personal, intellectual, and professional growth (Ritter & Trudeau, 1997). For many women, as the authors of the book The Women's Guide to Surviving Graduate School described, the decision to get a graduate

degree may be necessary to remain competitive in their jobs or professional arenas. Others, faced with divorce or loss of partners realize the economic importance of a graduate degree in supporting themselves, especially if they are still financially responsible for their children. For some women, a graduate degree is a means of upgrading professional skills or redefining expertise in an area of specialty to be more competitive. For others, graduate work promises a change in careers and an escape from a dead-end job or boring profession. For most women, the motivation to get a graduate degree involves a combination of all these reasons (Ritter & Trudeau, 1997). Nevertheless, whatever the reasons for pursuing graduate study, females face graduate school experiences that differs in many significant respects from that encountered by their male counterparts, often to the detriment of women

Although graduate school is often difficult for both men and women, factors such as increased role stain, gender role socialization, and gender-based discrimination may combine to make graduate school especially stressful for some women. Numerous studies have documented that there are significant differences by gender regarding graduate study (Brooks & Perot, 1991; Creswell & Bean, 1981; Ethington & Pisani, 1994; Kaplan, 1982; Mallinckrodt and Leong, 1992; Smart & Elton, 1982; Turner & Davidson, 1993). A study conducted by Mallinckrodt et al. (1989) found that, compared to men, women reported significantly more negative life changes and significantly more psychological symptoms of stress. An important purpose of this study was to identify specific life events that may be especially stressful. The life events that were identified in this study were meeting deadlines for papers, conflicts balancing academic/social time, significantly increased levels of debt, struggles with decisions about their professional future, increased economic difficulties, negative encounters with professors/advisors, increased

difficulties with jobs, final exams, decreased sexual activity, job duties that interfere with academic work, separation from close friends, conflict with partner/spouse, disagreement with friend, major illness of family member, and problems with academic performance. Job related concerns were more frequently reported by women than men (e.g., increased difficulties with a job, job duties interfering with academic work), as were stresses in interpersonal relationships (e.g., separation from close friends, conflict with spouse or partner, major illness of family member).

Although graduate education is a time of multiple and rapid life changes (Kuh &Thomas, 1983) which is associated with high risk for the development of physical and psychological health problems, a growing body of evidence suggests that social support has a beneficial effect on psychological well-being of graduate students (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Leavy, 1983). Unfortunately the gender differences and role conflicts are also evident in social support for graduate students. Mallinckrodt & Leong (1992) found that female graduate students reported significantly less support from their academic departments and family environments than did their male counterparts. The study also suggested that female graduate students are likely to face significantly more stress and symptoms of stress that their male counterparts. This confirms the result of the previous study conducted by Mallinckrodt et al. (1989). The sample (N=440) was drawn from graduate students residing in campus graduate housing at a large eastern university where graduate enrollment was approximately 5,000. Regarding their family environments, female graduate students reported inadequate financial resources and lower quality of leisure time, as well as less communication and support. They also reported less flexible curriculum provided by the academic departments, as well as fewer tangible supports and poorer quality relationship with other students. All these findings are consistent with the notion that gender socialization of both

men and women may encourage an asymmetrical flow of social support in which women typically give much more support than they receive (Aneshensel, 1986; Vanfossen, 1986).

Adjustment Experiences of International Students

Since World War II, the various political and cultural issues and problems experienced by international students have become topics for research, commissions, and national and international conferences. Among a number of important issues, international students' adjustment problems in a foreign setting has attracted most attention. Accordingly the sojourn of international students and their adjustment experiences have been documented by various researchers (Becker, 1967; Du Bois, 1956; Gezi, 1965; Heikinheimo & Shute, 1986; Luzzo et al., 1996; Lysgaard, 1955; Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992; Perkins et al., 1977; Sharma, 1973; Surdam & Collins, 1984).

Lysgaard (1955) interviewed 200 Norwegians who had spent time in the United States in 1953 about their adjustment problems in this foreign country and developed a well-known U-Curve adjustment explanation. The U-Curve hypothesis suggests that adjustment as a process over time seems to follow a U-shaped curve. First there is a period of curiosity, expectation, and enjoyment. This is followed by "crisis", a period of disappointment and disillusionment as the sojourners become aware of the demands of the new culture. Gradually the sojourners learn to cope with the demands and reach a "coming to terms" phase when they start establishing satisfying relationships and build up their levels of self-esteem.

After Lysgaard's (1955) study, the U-Curve theory has been constantly tested and modified. Becker (1967) conducted a study at the University of California in Los Angels to investigate Lysgaard's (1955) U-Curve hypothesis and its validity on international students from developed, semi-developed, and underdeveloped countries. The population of the Study consisted

of 27 students from India and 25 students from Israel and Europe. He concluded that the U-Curve hypothesis was valid on students from developed countries and was reversed on students from semi-developed and underdeveloped countries.

Shandiz (1981) studied 228 international students at Oklahoma State University and found that the developmental trend, especially social and cultural adjustment, followed the U-Curve pattern over periods of time. The pattern showed that the favorable attitudes and frequent interaction of international students with Americans started at high point, then dropped to a low point and then rose to another high point before they left the country.

In her book Foreign Students and Higher Education in the United States, Cora Du Bois (1956) introduced the adjustive processes of international students coming to study in the United States. She broke down the adjustive process into four phases: the spectator, the adaptive, the coming to terms, and the pre-departure. The author's diagnosis was made on the basis of the responses of 1042 foreign students during the years of 1951-1954. The spectator phase is characterized by psychological detachment from the new experiences. Things happen to the visitors which they note as expected, strange or novel. While the experiences may be interesting, exciting, confusing, or even humiliating, the foreign students are protected from serious distress or major influence since they are not yet personally involved in the scene. During the spectator period the stresses of adjustment are assumed to exist primarily in the more superficial aspects of the personality. The adaptation phase is characterized by active involvement in the problems of adjustment to the life of the host country. Adjustive stresses become prominent and the international students try out their repertory of adjustive strategies and tactics. The 'coming to terms' phase sets in when the adaptive issues raised for the individual during the preceding phase

are brought into an equilibrium. This period may be characterized by either marked positive or negative attitudes or by objective judgements of the host country. If the equilibrium is charged with negative affect toward the host country, overt criticisms and verbal aggressiveness may be more freely expressed than in the earlier phases. The pre-departure phase sets in shortly before the individual leaves the host country. The importance of returning home gains a new ascendancy in the awareness of the individual. It may also be assumed that during this phase the foreign students see the host country and the sojourn period with a somewhat altered perspectives.

In this study Du Bois also identified the principal factors in foreign students' adjustment. They are: 1) Practical living problems, 2) United States way of life, society, customs, 3) United States educational system, 4) English language, 5) Opportunities for social contacts, and 6) Specific educational institutions. It is also interesting to note that 44% of the respondents said that they had no adjustment problems.

In a similar study Kohls' (1979) established a pattern of cultural adjustment "W" curve. This model was designed for the visitors from different countries coming to the United States for a temporary stay. This curve contains five stages: Honeymoon period, culture shock, initial adjustment, mental isolation, and finally acceptance and integration. Honeymoon period is full of great expectations and positive approach. The new things are interesting and exciting. Visitors are happy to be in new culture. Similarities are noted everywhere. Culture shock period contains immersion in new problems- language, housing, transportation, shopping. As a result of continuous trying to comprehend the new culture and new language, mental fatigue emanates. Attention turns from similarities to differences. Insignificant difficulties get blown out of proportion and become major catastrophes as perspective is lost. During initial adjustment period,

everyday activities such as housing, shopping are no longer major problems. Visitors seem to gain a sense of control over the situation emerges. During mental isolation period, frustration and sometimes a loss of self-confidence result. Many visitors still feel they can not express themselves as well as they can in their native language. Students also start to feel lonely now. Acceptance and integration period start after a routine work, such as school, work, has been established. The students seem to accept the habits, customs, foods, and characteristics of the host country. They also feel comfortable with new friends, associates and the language of the country.

Many researchers sought to identify specific adjustment problems that international students have generally experienced (Gibson, 1990; Reinicke, 1986; Xia, 1992; Yeung, 1980; Wu, 1994). Gezi (1965) conducted a study among a group of Middle Eastern students studying in eleven California colleges and universities during 1958 summer session to identify their problems as international students, the effect of their sojourn on their attitudes and learning and their behavior, problems and readjustment upon their return to their native lands. Findings of this study suggest that pre-arrival attitude of students from Middle Eastern countries and their perceptions of how Americans rated their homelands were significantly associated with their subsequent adjustment in the United States. Although the duration of the Middle Eastern students' sojourn in the United States was not found to be significantly associated with their adjustment here, the meaningfulness of their interaction with the Americans was found to be significantly associated with their adjustment. The study also found that international students from the Middle Eastern countries expressed dissatisfaction with their sojourn if they had serious academic problems.

Sharma (1973) conducted a survey to identify the adjustment problems experienced by foreign non-European graduate students enrolled at the campuses of the University of North

Carolina and the Duke University. Data were collected from a sample consisting with 374 randomly selected non-European graduate foreign students enrolled at that the time of the study. The study revealed that the non-European graduate students enrolled at these universities experienced the following types of academic problems: giving oral reports, participation in class discussion, taking notes in class, understanding lectures, taking appropriate courses of study, and preparing written reports. Their personal problems included home sickness, inadequate housing, enough funds, food and finding companionship with the opposite sex. Finally, their social problems related to getting used to American social customs, making personal friends with American students, being accepted by social groups, and inhibited participation in campus activities. The study also revealed that there was a strong, positive relationship among the academic, personal, and social adjustment problems, and that academic problems were more severe than the other two types and took longer time in their resolution.

Assuming that international students have both common problems and problems peculiar to their own national groups, Perkins et al. (1977) conducted a study to identify any significant differences in the way the Chinese, Indian, and other international students at the University of Georgia regarding their adjustment problems. The results indicated that Chinese found 'English proficiency', 'educational preparation', 'racial or religious discrimination', 'unfriendliness of people from the community', 'homesickness', to be more problems than Indians and other international students. Concerning 'interaction with people from my own country', the other international students differed significantly from both Chinese and Indians, interacting less frequently from their own country than both Chinese and Indians. With regard to 'interaction with other foreigners', the other international students interact more than the Chinese or Indians.

Yeung (1980) compared the anticipated adjustment problems with the problems that were actually experienced by 67 international students enrolled at North Texas State University. Results of the study indicated that problems international students encountered, in rank order, were: 1) financial; 2) communication and language; 3) social-cultural; 4) housing and food; 5) psychological and personal; 6) health; 7) academic; and 8) international student services.

In a study to investigate the inter-cultural contact and adjustment problems, Surdam & Collins (1984) used an individual level approach. Unlike many previous studies which have investigated the factors related to foreign students' adjustment problems, this study investigated the adaption of foreign students to determine possible relationships between their adaptation and certain independent variables which included family and personal backgrounds, pre-sojourn knowledge about the United States, previous travel experience, participation in orientation programs, perceived English language adequacy, the use of campus student services, interaction and intimacy with Americans, and the length of time spent in the United States. The results of this study suggest that foreign student who spent more of their leisure time with Americans were significantly better adapted than those who spent more leisure time with fellow citizens, and students from foreign countries who believed that their English was adequate on arrival were significantly better adapted than those who believed it to be inadequate. Parental education and geographic location have had influences on foreign students' adaptation. International students from better educated families either in terms of father's education or mother's education, were significantly better adapted than those from less well-educated families whereas foreign students from Western countries were better adapted than those who came from non-Western countries. Religious participation and attitudes are also found to have a relationship with foreign students'

adaptation. Foreign students who developed a very positive attitude toward religion as a result of their sojourn were significantly better adapted than those who developed a very negative attitude toward religion. International students who perceived that discrimination had been a problem for them during the first 3 months of their stay were significantly less adapted than those for whom discrimination had not been a problem. However, foreign students' participation in campus and community activities was not found to be significantly related to their adaptation.

Xia (1992) investigated and compared the adjustment problems from a sample of 215 Asian students from eight different countries at the University of Winconsin-Madison. The result showed that the most troublesome adjustment problems for Asian students were English language, placement services, and financial aid.

Mallinckrodt & Leong (1992) investigated the level of stressors and stress symptoms in the lives of male and female international graduate students, as well as the sources of social support that might be the most useful in coping with stressors. Social support factors used in study were divided into two categories: Graduate program support and family environment support. Graduate program support factors included student-faculty relations, quality of instruction, facilities and curriculum flexibility, and tangible support and relations with students, whereas family environment support included communication and cohesion, financial resources and leisure quality, child rearing, and living conditions. Stress symptoms used in this study included depression, anxiety, and physical health. Results of this suggest that although all forms of graduate program support seemed to be significantly associated with lower levels of symptoms, relations with faculty members were particularly beneficial for male international graduate students, whereas tangible support, relations with other students, and curriculum flexibility

seemed to be most beneficial for female international graduate students. Regarding family support, all types seemed to be broadly beneficial for male international graduate students, whereas female international graduate students faced more problems regarding quality of child care, living conditions, and inadequate financial resources which were strongly related to their depression.

Guclu (1993) conducted a study about international graduate students' adjustment problems at the University of Pittsburgh and found that European students reported fewer problems than did students from other regions.

Wu (1994) investigated the patterns of adjustment concerns and needs perceived by 125 community college students from 35 countries at Kirkland Community College in Iowa. Analysis of the data revealed that the leading areas of concern were: English language, financial aid, and job placement.

In order for colleges and universities to assist international students as they adjust to college life in America, student affairs professionals need to increase their awareness of the particular needs and concerns of these students (Brower, 1992). As a means for addressing this issue, Luzzo et al. (1996) conducted a study using qualitative methods to develop an innovative method for helping colleges and universities determine the degree to which the needs of international students are being addressed by existing programs and services. The results indicate that international students enrolled at a medium sized university in the southeast are overall satisfied with the services provided by the university to meet their academic needs. All participants expressed positive experiences living in the residence hall which was considered by them an excellent opportunity to interact with other students from different backgrounds and cultural experiences. All participants reported active involvement in campus activities which was viewed

as positive important experiences of their sojourn period.

Summary

A review of the literature suggests that international students go through an adjustment processes during their sojourn in the United States. There are problems that international students encounter as they study at American colleges and universities. Such problems are multiple in nature although there are some recurring themes indicated by some researchers. Some of the dilemmas international students face include homesickness, money problems, social problems, educational problems, cultural differences, discriminations and many others.

Research has also suggested that international students arrive in the United States with high expectations and an optimistic outlook. When the demands of school and differences in culture and environment arise, many international students become disoriented. This is when they long for their own culture or familiar cues that they have become accustomed to all their lives. Some of the needs faced by the international students are met by the student affair services but international students are left to cope with many of the problems in solitude.

Many of the studies discussed in this chapter emphasized the existence of academic, social, and personal adjustment problems encountered by international students. Some of the studies dealt with graduate students' experiences, as well as female graduate students' experiences. However, none of the studies dealt specifically with the international female graduate students' adjustment experiences. The literature review did not inform us whether international female graduate students encountered the same adjustment problems as other group of international students did (such as male graduate students, female undergraduate students, or male undergraduate students), how similar or dissimilar international female graduate students'

experience from American female graduate students. We also lack information about why international female graduate students come to United States to study. Hence the purpose of this study was to investigate the adjustment problems encountered by the international female graduate students studying at an urban university. The major research question that guided the study was "*What do international female graduate students perceive as their adjustment problems when they come to study in the higher educational institutions of United States of America"?* In addition to recognizing the existence of such problems, this study will also attempt to reveal how female international graduate students studying at an urban university respond to these problems as they try to accomplish their goals.

Conceptual Framework

After reviewing the literature on international students' adjustment experiences as well as female graduate students' experiences, in this study, I decided to investigate international female graduate students' adjustment problems in particular. Drawn from the general literature review, international female graduate students' adjustment problems can be divided into three broad categories: 1) academic, 2) personal, and 3) social. Academic issues that emerged as the most recurring adjustment problem encountered by international students included; a) language and b) communication. Personal adjustment problems included; a) homesickness, b) housing, and c) financial problems. In social area, international students encounter problems in: a) culture shock, b) discrimination. The literature review also revealed that female graduate students encounter problems due to less support from academic departments and family environments.

The second question of this study focused on how international female graduate students handle their adjustment problems. The third focus of this study was why did international female

graduate students choose to come to the United States for graduate education. And finally, what suggestions did international female graduate students studying in an urban research university have for the university policy-makers and administrators to help facilitate their adjustment in this particular university. This can also help locate sources of help and ease international female graduate students' adjustment experiences. Based on this framework, I conducted my study.

Chapter III

Research Design

The purpose of this study is to investigate the personal experiences of the international female graduate students' adjustment problems and their coping strategies studying at an urban research university. The major research question for this study is:"*What do international female graduate students perceive as their adjustment problems when they come to study in the higher educational institutions of the United States of America"?* Although there have been many studies done on the topic of adjustment problems of international students studying in the United States, very few studies have been conducted to investigate the female international students' adjustment problems during their stay as graduate students in the United States. In this study, I investigated the adjustment problems encountered by international female graduate students in the academic, personal and social spheres. In the academic arena adjustment problems included lack of English language proficiency, and participation in class discussion while in problems in personal area included homesickness, housing, and financial problem. The social adjustment problems included culture shock, discrimination, and lack of family support.

Rationale for Using Qualitative Research

A variety of research methods are used as means for better understanding complex social phenomena. It is important that the researcher selects the most appropriate method for the task at hand. The word 'qualitative' implies an emphasis on processes and meanings that are not rigorously examined, or measured (if measured at all), in terms of quantity, amount, intensity, or frequency (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). A qualitative researcher stresses the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the

situational constraints that shape the inquiry. Qualitative researchers emphasize the value-laden nature of inquiry. They seek answers to questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning and to describe those meanings (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). By doing so, they construct a portrayal of what is being studied. In contrast, quantitative studies emphasize the measurement and analysis of casual relationships between variables, not processes. Inquiry is purported to be within a value-free framework. While the former offers significant insight on new emergent issues and complex social phenomena, the latter provides us with information that can be statistically compared and contrasted.

Until recently, the qualitative approach had been rejected by many educational researchers as unscientific, or only exploratory, or entirely personal and full of bias, mainly because of its lack of research controls (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). They argue that the existence of an objective reality can only be found through a quantitative approach (Patton, 1990). On the other hand, defenders of qualitative approaches say that qualitative methods typically produce a wealth of detailed information about a much smaller number of people and cases. This may reduce the generalizability of the study but increases the understanding of the topic (Bogdan & Biklen,1992). This wealth of information emerges from participants' past experiences and events as they recall them. Lincon & Guba (1985) acknowledged several advantages of using qualitative methods: 1) allow the researcher to carry out research in natural setting or context of the entity for which study is proposed, 2) allow sufficient adaptability to encompass and adjust to the variety of realities using humans as primary data collection instruments, 3) utilization if intuitive knowledge in addition to propositional knowledge, 4) use of purposeful sample, 5) allow the research design to emerge, 6) likely to define special criteria for trustworthiness.

The purpose is to investigate the social phenomena of the personal experiences of adjustment problems of international female graduate students studying at an urban university located in deep south. The ultimate goal is to describe a complex pattern of the subject of adjustment problems of these international female graduate students in sufficient depth and detail so that one who has not experienced the same can understand it. Accordingly, I choose the qualitative research paradigm for this study in order to understand these female international graduate students' experiences, told in their own words. This approach assures a holistic outlook in the research in order to gain a comprehensive and complete picture (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) of the adjustment problems encountered by these students. I assume that there is no single or simple problem encountered by every international female graduate student. My assumptions are that the adjustment problems encountered by these participants are varied and complicated. The rationale for using focus group discussion is that no nonhuman instrument is sufficiently flexible to adapt to the complex or unique situation as it evolves (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). Qualitative methods provided the opportunity to study the adjustment problems encountered by the female international graduate students as a function of moving to a new culture. The study requires a wealth of information about the participants' experiences, feelings, opinions, and knowledge. The importance of this qualitative interpretive method is that data can be obtained in areas of social life that cannot be easily tapped by quantitative data collecting techniques (Glasser & Strauss, 1967).

Site Selection and Participants

As an international female graduate student studying at an urban university myself, I was interested in personal experiences of female international graduate students studying at the same

university. In this study, purposeful sampling was used (Patton, 1990). Purposeful sampling should be judged on the purpose and rationale of each study. In purposeful sampling, the researcher has the liberty to select particular elements from the population that will be representative and informative about the topic of interest (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997). On the basis of the researcher's knowledge of the population, a judgement is made about which subjects should be selected to provide the best information to address the purpose of the research. Hence, in this study I used purposeful sampling to select participants for this study based on my prior demographic knowledge of the population, which I obtained from the Office of International Students and Scholars at university.

In order to limit the variations in the background of these female international students, I decided to focus on non-European countries. Even though these female graduate students come from different countries, many of the countries have similar histories, such as, being colonized by either British or French, and having the same type of educational system. Finally, English is not the first language of any of the countries. Therefore, I obtained a list of all international female graduate students studying at the university who were from non-European countries. A list of ten female graduate international students was extracted from that pool who came from non-European countries. This was done by going through the records of Office of International Students and Scholars (OISS) where students were classified by their country of origin, the department they are in, their classification, and the admission date.

An introductory letter describing the study and requesting their participation in my study was sent to each international female graduate student on the list. A follow up telephone call was made to find out students' responses. Four participants agreed to and were selected to participate

in the focus group. Among the participants, one came from Bangladesh, one from Cameroon, one from Taiwan, and another from Venezuela. Two of the participants are studying in the College of Education and other two are studying in the College of Business. All of these participants had been studying at the university for more than one year. The age of the participants of this study varies from 29 to 38. Three of the four participants were married and one participant was single.

Permission was obtained from the Human Subjects Committee at the university to interview these participants. Each participant was contacted by telephone with the reference to the Director of OISS requesting her participation and suggestions for a suitable time for the interview. A follow-up conversation was held with all participants to set the time and place for the interview.

Data Collection

Once I had selected a site, and the number of participants for this study, focus group interviewing was selected as the most appropriate method for data collection. Morgan (1997) has defined the term 'focus group' as used in qualitative research as basically 'group interviews' The reliance is on the interaction within the group, based on topics that are supplied by the researcher who typically takes the role of moderator. A variety of research (Bellenger et al. & Goldstucker, 1976; Higgenbotham & Cox, 1979) provides detailed discussion about the usefulness of focus group. Among them most common are the following: 1) Obtaining general background information about a topic of interest; 2) generating research hypotheses that can be submitted to further research and testing using more quantitative approaches; 3) stimulating new ideas and creative concepts; 4) diagnosing the potential for problems with new program, services, institutions, or other objects of interest; 5) generating impressions of products, programs,

services, institutions, or other objects of interests; 6) interpreting previously obtained quantitative results; and 7) learning how respondents talk about the phenomenon of interest which, in turn, may facilitate the design of questionnaires, survey instruments, or other research tools that might be employed in more quantitative research. It is important to remember that a major reason for this is to develop an instrument to be used in a larger, more generalizable study of the same phenomena. In this regard, focus group interviews seem to fit for the research purpose of this study.

Focus group research has become more and more the norm in qualitative research because of the flexibility it allows in conducting interviews. Various researchers (Fontana & Frey, 1994; Janesick, 1995; Marshall & Rossman, 1995; Morgan, 1997) have found the unique advantages of the focus group interview as a data collecting technique. Stewart & Shamdasani (1990) state that focus group provide data from a group of people much more quickly and at less cost than would be the case if each individual were interviewed separately. Fontana and Frey (1994) also agree that a group interview has many advantages; among them the most dominant are that "group interviews are inexpensive, data rich, flexible, stimulating to respondents, recall aiding, and cumulative and elaborative, over and above individual responses" (p. 365)

Bellenger et al. (1976) noted that there existed a give and take relationship among the participants in a focus group interview. Participants are not only able to give their opinion but also hear other participants' views . Hearing from other participants in a focus group may give insights to their own opinions and understanding (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). This give and take relationship produces a high level of participant involvement in the discussion offering the participants the opportunity to agree or challenge other responses on the topic (Levy, 1979).

Morgan (1997) declared that one advantage of group interviewing is that the participants' interactions among themselves replace their interaction with the interviewer, leading to a greater emphasis on participants' points of view. This also allows the researcher to observe nonverbal responses of the participants such as gestures, smiles, frowns, and so forth, more closely than possible if individual interviews were conducted. Janesick (1995) found that a focus group interview allowed her glimpses into the perceptions of the participants of her study that she would not otherwise have had.

Although focus group interviews are valuable research tools and offer a number of advantages, they are not a panacea for all research needs and they do have limitations. Fontana & Frey (1994) state that the emerging group culture may interfere with individual expression. Marshall & Rossman (1995) caution that the interviewer has less control over a group than individual interviews. There is often the possibility of dead-end or irrelevant issues being discussed. Another problem that can arise is that one person may dominate the group. It is also difficult to discuss sensitive topics in a group setting. Talking about personal problems while studying in a foreign country may well be one of those sensitive topics especially if participants' cultures believe that they shouldn't talk about their personal problems with outside people. Stewart & Shamdasani (1990) expressed that the 'live' and immediate nature of the interaction of the focus group interviews may lead the researcher or the decision maker to place greater faith in the findings than is actually warranted. In addition, the open-ended nature of responses obtained in focus group interviews often makes summarization and interpretation of results difficult.

However, in order to overcome the majority of these problems the interviewer must keep one person or small coalition of persons from dominating the group. The interviewer must also

encourage the recalcitrant respondents to participate and work to obtain responses from the entire group to ensure the fullest possible coverage of the topic (Fontana & Frey, 1994).

In this study, four participants were selected for the focus group interview. Two of the four participants asked for the guideline questions that would be discussed during the focus group interview beforehand. I met with these two participants and gave them the guideline questions that would be discussed in the focus group. They explained to me that the guideline questions would help them to think about the topic beforehand which would help them in the focus group. At that time, I also reminded them about my research questions and asked them whether they had any questions regarding the research question and interview questions.

On the day of the focus group interview, we met at 10 a.m. After introductions, reading and signing of consent forms, I again assured the participants that their responses would be confidential. They were also assured that pseudonyms would be used to protect their identities. The discussion began with the major research question:"*What do international female graduate students perceive as their adjustment problems when they come to study in the higher educational institutions of United States of America"?* Specific interview questions that were discussed in the focus group were:

(1) Why did you choose to pursue graduate education at this university?

(2) Describe your experiences so far.

(3) What was most difficult adjustment problem?

(4) What did you do in those situations?

(5) What do you think that the university can do to help you regarding these problems?

During the focus group interviews, I observed that my status as a female international graduate student proved to be advantageous in establishing trust and rapport during the interview process. As a female international graduate student I was less intimidating. My status eased the way for honest discussions about professors and the American culture in general without fear of repercussions.

The focus group interviews were audio-taped and I took notes manually observing the nonverbal responses of the participants such as gestures, facial expression, and so forth. The group discussion was transcribed later in their entirety and printed. After the transcript was printed I coded the responses, looking for trends and themes that were in common with current literature on this topic.

Data Analysis

An inductive method was used in this study to analyze data. The inductive method requires units to be formed that serve as a basis for defining categories and developing themes. Units came from focus group discussion transcripts, and observation notes. A unit can either be a phrase, a sentence, or a paragraph (Merriam, 1988). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), a unit must have two qualities: 1) it should reveal information relevant to the study, and 2) it is the smallest piece of information which can be understood in the absence of any additional information.

For the purpose of this study, a unit was a single statement, a sentence, or a phrase which gave me insight to the understanding of the reasons why international female graduate students came to study in the United States, the problems experienced by international female graduate students, the coping strategies that international female graduate students employed, and the

suggestions that international female graduate students had to facilitate their adjustment problems for the institutions.

Units were identified and each unit was cut from the transcript and taped to a 5"x 8" index card to make sorting easy. For purposes of retrieval, each index card was coded according to the respondents' code letter. Then the categories of this study were formed by sorting the units according to whether they had the same meaning or idea. All units that projected the same idea were put together; if the next unit did not belong, a new category was formed. Through constant comparison, categories were integrated and sorted according to whether they exhibited the same theme. Categories were then grouped according to thematic value, making inductive analysis (moving from specific to general) of data possible (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

After analyzing, I categorized the data into six different themes as they emerged from the transcriptions. These themes covered the areas of:

- Decision-making: Here participants expressed why they choose to come to the United States to study.
- Language: Here participants expressed the difficulties that they encounter because English was not their native language.
- Discrimination: Here participants expressed how they were being discriminated by their instructors, their peers, or other people.
- Ignorance: Participants expressed their perception that American people had misconceptions about other people and cultures around the world.
- Coping strategies: The different situations and encounters that these participants experienced required solutions in order to move forward. Descriptions of how

these participants went about handling these situations are addressed.

- Future suggestions: Here participants expressed their views what the university can offer to facilitate their adjustment experiences.

All these themes but one are embedded in the research questions the study was seeking to investigate. The theme of ignorance was not included in the conceptual framework or the research questions the study was seeking to answer. While a sample of four female international graduate students does not lend itself to broad generalizations and conclusions, this study does raise some important questions and suggestions for possible directions for further inquiry with larger samples.

Trustworthiness of the Study

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) trustworthiness answers the question: "[H]ow can an inquirer persuade his or her audience that the findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to, worth taking account of?" (P. 290). The criteria for trustworthiness include credibility, dependability, and transferability. Credibility refers to the fact that the study is believable, the participants have been accurately portrayed while dependability refers to consistency of the reporting over time. Transferability means that the study may be useful in another context.

In this study two strategies suggested by Merriam (1988) for establishing credibility.

- Member checks. Data and interpretations were taken back to the participants and they were asked if the results accurately portrayed their opinions.
- Peer examination. A knowledgeable peer who has an interest in the study, was identified and requested to serve as a debriefer.

The dependability of this study was achieved through an "audit trail" (Merriam, 1988). A detailed

description of how data were collected and how categories were formed was provided to help the researcher who wishes to replicate the study (Merriam, 1988). Regarding transferability issue in this study, judgements were made possible by providing a rich, thick description, to make available to anyone interested in transferability information adequate for judgement (Merriam, 1988).

Chapter IV

Representation of Data and Findings

For the purposes of data analysis I categorized the data into six different themes as they emerged from the transcriptions. The themes covered the areas of

- decision-making
- language
- discrimination
- ignorance
- coping strategies
- future suggestions

Each of the above themes is discussed in this chapter.

Decision-making

I began the focus group by asking the question why did the participants decide to pursue their graduate education in the United States. The question was: "Why did you choose to pursue your graduate study in the United States"? Two participants said that they came to the United States to study because they got a home governmental scholarship to study abroad. Two other participants stated that they came to the United States to study in order to get a good job. Diana mentioned that both she and her husband came to the United States to get a Ph. D. in counseling. It was always their dream to come to the United States for higher education. But they could not fulfil the dream due to lack of resources. When their home country university, where they used to teach before coming to the United States, offered them scholarships to study in a foreign country, they decided to come to the United States. Diana said:

> It was our dream since high school to come here (United States), but we could not come here that time. When we began to teach in the university, we had some resources, we had a scholarship for studying abroad and we applied for coming to the United States.

She also mentioned that American counseling program was perceived to be best by her native educational system. Lena also reported that she came to the United States on a government scholarship. She was working in a government bank. She got a scholarship offered by the bank under the human development program for studying M. B. A. in the United States. Lena was interviewed for the scholarship and succeeded in getting the scholarship. Lena said:

> I worked there (bank). They (the authority) gave me a scholarship. They called for an interview, I appeared and they chose me.

Emna said she came to the United States to study because she was not content with her educational system. The educational system in her country could not accommodate her learning style. According to her the learning process in her country was very stressful and competitive. The students in her country had to go through a lot of nationwide standardized tests and those test were very hard to pass. Only 30% of the total students pass every year. The other 70% students who fail in a test had to wait for next year to take the test again.

> I came to United States to study because the study, the learning in my country is very stressful because we have to go through a lot of national standardized tests and it is very hard to pass those tests. Only 30% of the people can pass the test. Everybody else just fail. They need to take the test next year. But it's a long time and everyone in the country has so high degrees and it is very competitive.

Emna also mentioned that besides the unsatisfactory educational system, job scarcity in her country was another reason for her to make decision to come to the United States. Even the 30% students who were able to pass the exam, can not get a suitable job. Job markets were even more

competitive than getting a degree. She said:

> A lot of people have high degrees, but they don't have any job. They just become taxi driver.

Tina also expressed similar reasons for coming to the United States to pursue graduate education. She revealed that job scarcity in her country was severe. Many people in her country had high degrees, but they did not have jobs. As an underdeveloped country, her country had opportunity to get funding from United States to give scholarships to the eligible students to study in the higher educational institutions of United States. Both Tina and her husband got scholarships to come to the United states and study. After she finished her masters in business and her husband Ph. D. in immunology from an American university, they went back to their native country. But they could not get any suitable job; both Tina and her husband came back to the United States again. Since Tina wanted to be a faculty and teach in a university level, she started working on her Ph. D. in business and her husband looked for job. She believed strongly that if she came back to the United States and finish her Ph. D., she would be able to get the job she wanted. In Tina's words:

> It is like going back to a country where everybody goes to school but no job. Think about that these people are given all these scholarships and they come here and finish their degrees and go back to Cameroon and there is no jobs. If I had a job in my country I would have stayed there. I knew if I came to the United States I can do what I want to do.

Language

For international students whose native language is not English, language is one of the major academic adjustment problems. The second question of the focus group was, "What was most difficult adjustment problem"? Diana expressed that language was most difficult for her. She

did not know much English when she came to the United States. She knew how to read and write but was not good in understanding American accent. It was very frustrating for her.

> The language was the most difficult because even though I knew how to read English, I did not know how to listen some words like in different context, different sentence like how different people speak different way. I was lost. In my first day of English class, I did not understand to my teacher. It was very frustrating for me.

She took two English remedial courses in order to be more proficient in language but she felt that only two courses were not enough to learn English proficiently. Lena encounter problems in participating in class discussion and giving oral report in the class. She felt that she knew the subject that was supposed to discuss but because of her lack of English language proficiency she could not explain the subject very well.

> I have been here only for one year and two months and I am still learning English. The students from here, they are here for life and they know everything about their language very well. So when I try to explain something I may not explain the thing as well as the student from here. I may know the matter very well but I may not explain that.

Tina also faced problems giving class presentations and oral report in the class. To Tina the problem was not their ability to understand English but being understood by Americans. She felt that her own accent causing difficulties in their academic achievements. She reported that as a teaching assistant she needed to help her professor teaching classes. Like professor teaching assistant also got evaluated. She believed that because of her heavy accent she got less points in evaluation.

> I am a teaching assistant and I usually have good evaluations. I have 4.0 for everything and then it goes somewhere I think it is communication, I get 3. 0. And my professor would say Tina, you have an accent.

Emna also encountered difficulties regarding her accent and would like to rectify that problem. She looked for speech therapy services that would help her to improve her accent. But she could not find that kind of services at the current university where she was enrolled as graduate student. She reported:

> I think before when I was in another school, the school provided speech therapy program for the international students or any other students who want to correct their accent, and that was free service. But here I could not find that kind of help at all.

Discrimination

As these international female graduate students embark on their studies in their areas of study, they encounter different experiences. Some of these experiences are positive while others are negative. Discrimination is one of the experiences that these participants felt prevailed both in class and out of class even though some of the incidents described by the participants did not resemble discrimination. There seemed to be a lack of understanding among the participants what discrimination was. It was the participants who used the term "discrimination" in order to describe some incidents that they had encountered. There was no question asked specifically about discrimination. The term "discrimination" came up while the participants were discussing about the language problem. The participants felt that they encountered discrimination because of their foreignness. Lena felt discriminated by her instructors. Lena was business major student and she needed to cite plenty of business theory that were working well in the business world. She felt discriminated because her instructors would not accept any citations drawn from other than American business industry. To her there were numerous business theories that were working in business industries in other part of the world. She described one incident that happened:

> In one of my classes, we were talking about the some theory but the instructor said that this theory does not work any more. I told him that this theory works in India, I know. This works very well. But then she said, "No, I don't know anything about any under developed country". So the result is I can't cite any example from my own country.

Lena also felt discriminated by her fellow American students because the American students never allow any international student to be a group member during group project assignment. Diana supported Lena's view partially by mentioning that sometimes she felt discriminated, not by her instructors but by students and by other people because of her foreignness. Diana felt the American instructors in her department were respectful of other cultures and they did not discriminate any international students but the American students were not. She mentioned;

> I did feel discriminated with some students that I supervised.

Emna reported that she encountered discrimination by the staff and administrators of the university. She felt that international students were being discriminated because international students were not in a position to complain against any unfairness. They lacked knowledge about the resources where they could get help.

> Once the university gave me a scholarship and then they (authority) canceled it. They did not give me any reason. Just sent me a letter that saying that my scholarship was canceled. They just took away my scholarship. And I thought that it was so unfair. And I felt so helpless. I did not know what to do.

To Tina the issue was not being discriminated but how to minimize the effect of being discriminated. She said that she had lived in the united States long time to know the fact that discrimination would always prevail and she could not do anything about it. She believed that America was great place for graduate education. That is why students from all over the world keep coming to the United States to study. For the same reason she came to the United States

too. If international students experienced some negative experiences like discrimination, they should learn to accept those negative situations and try to find a solution. International students should not complain about the negative experience because it their decision to come to the United States. Tina also mentioned that solution could be found if international students learned how to cope with the situation.

> May be the solution is how do you pass that (discrimination). You have to put with that (discrimination) everyday, everywhere, from elementary school to wherever you go. That's my experience. The point is how to get pass that, how to minimize the effect.

Ignorance

Participants in this study perceived that American people lack knowledge about other countries and cultures. The participants termed American people's lack of knowledge of other cultures as "ignorance". The issue of ignorance is an emergent theme that came out of the focus group discussion and which was not identified in the literature or in my conceptual framework. The term "ignorance" emerged in the focus group interview as the topic of discussion while the participant were talking about "discrimination". No question was asked specifically about the term "ignorance". The participants are in the opinion that many of the assumptions of the American people and how they reacted towards these participants were based on their "ignorance" of other cultures or behavior. All four of the participants in the focus group presented examples of what they perceived as "ignorance" by American people. Emna described:

> Some people will ask me "Where are you from" and I said "I am from Taiwan". Then they would tell me, "May I ask you a question, does your country has computer"? And I said, "Oh my goodness, that is one of the best industrial country, how could you ask that question"?

Lena agreed with Emna's perception and described her own experience:

> It is the same thing with me too. When they hear that I am from Bangladesh they said oh your husband always beat you. When they hear that I am Muslim, they would say oh your husband has four wives.

Tina related another example of "ignorance":

> Everybody (American people) here knows (thinks) that people in Africa walk around naked, they don't have any food, they don't have anything. ... What you see here is ignorance.

Coping Strategies

The participants in this study encountered different challenging or difficult experiences culturally, socially, or educationally during their stay in the United States. It was necessary for them to evaluate the different situations they were in and to make a decision how to handle those situations. The participants were asked, "What do you do in a difficult situation"? All of the four participants reported that they tried to build support system for them in order to cope with a difficult situation. This networking could be a response to a social, cultural, or educational dilemma. Some of the networking came through friendships with other American people, through other international graduate students, and through major advisors or professors. Diana built friendship with some American people who helped her with the child care responsibilities when it was necessary. She described:

> I have a American friend who help me to share my responsibilities because they have also children. They are more or less in the same age. When they are busy I can have their children in my apartment, and when I am busy they take care of my children.

Tina also built a support system with her neighbor regarding her childcare issue. She also described the importance of networking for support:

> I have a neighbor, when I went to Mexico, I put my child with her, she dropped my daughter in school in the morning and also picked her up in the afternoon. ... If you have to survive, you need to have somebody. By yourself it is impossible. You need to get somebody.

Tina also reported that it was important to know well one or two professors who can understand her problems and who can help with certain problems if necessary. She found it to be very helpful in her experience.

> [G]et to know one or two professors that you can become close to, who can understand your problems. Because if something happened to you so that you can tell them and they would understand. It helps.

Emna agreed with Tina's perception and asserted that she also found networking with professors to be very helpful.

> I found that very helpful too. Once I had some problems and I talked to my professor and he advised me about where I can get help about those problems.

Sometimes participant took some actions in order to handle specific problems encountered by them. When faced problem due to the lack of knowledge of American people of cultural differences, Lena tried to solve the problem by interacting with those people and by explaining the differences between America and her native country. She said:

> I explain them the differences, what are actual difference between here and there. And I tell them my background, I tell them about my country, I tell them about my culture, so that they can compare.

Tina described that when she encountered problems due to her accent in class presentation or oral report, she tried to write down the disputed words that people had problems understanding so that other people had ideas what she was talking about. She described:

> I remember one time while I was giving a presentation in the class

> where I was talking about "Lego" but I pronounced "Lago". And the instructor said, "T, what is Lago"? And I said, "Oh, I am sorry, it is my accent again, let me spell it". And then I spelled it on the board and said that we are talking about "Lego".

Diana also mentioned that she took the same approach when she encountered problems due to her strong accent.

Sometimes participants took some actions to control the emotional response to the stressful situation such as interactions with other people, talking about their feelings, relaxations to divert attention from the stress symptom. Lena reported that when she felt that she was being discriminated, she felt sad or angry. When this happened she usually took walk to calm her down:

> Sometimes I feel angry, sometimes I feel sad. When I feel sad or angry, I walk around, that makes me calm down.

Emna tried to get used to the difficult situations. When she felt discriminated she tries to become indifferent or not get hurt.

> I try to get used to it, try to become indifferent, I don't care about them as much as they don't care about me. ... But if they have attitude to learn more I would like to share more but other I would just laugh and go away. That is my strategy.

Tina said that she always hold positive attitudes. To her the issue was to minimize the negative effect of a difficult situation. According to her, living and studying in a different country was not easy task.

> But while we are here (United States), you need to survive. I am trying to survive all the negativity here. My issue is not the issue of accent or where are you from in the class, my issue is how you pass that without letting people know. The issue is to minimize the negative effect.

Each of these participants came up with their own way how to handle their difficult situations

during their stay in the United States. They discovered their inner strengths how to handle situations regarding the difficulties they encountered in their academic life or socio-cultural life.

Future Suggestions

Participants were asked to give suggestions on how they can be helped in dealing with their problems. When asked "What do you think that the university can offer to help facilitate your adjustment problems", participants in this study put forward their several opinions and desires. According to the participants areas needed attention were accent problem of international students. To Tina accent was the biggest problem for all international students and she thought that the university should address this issue.

> To me, I believe the biggest issue for all international students is accent issue. This is great school. But I think the accent issue should really be addressed.

Suggestions were also made regarding the lack of a support group on an informal place for international female graduate students to socialize and talk about their frustrations and problems. Diana directed her suggestion towards the international student office:

> I think international student office arrange meetings like this for us (international female graduate students) to share our experiences. It helps.

To Lena the cultural difference and lack of communication between international students and American students big problem. She suggested that university administrators can offer program in order to minimize the communication gap between international students and American students:

> I think one thing that the university can think about some program where international students and American students can interact with each other. They can introduce that kind program.

Suggestions were also directed to the faculty/professors. Lena felt that professors can do a lot to

help solve particular problems faced by the international students enrolled in their classes. She described:

> Sometimes we have to do group presentation about some company here. Most of the international students they don't know anybody from the local company or industry. So they are really in problem in that class. And American students, they make their group by themselves. They don't want to take any international student in their group because of the language barrier. ... In that case teacher can take initiatives. He or she can tell that one American student for each group or vice versa. There is no harm in that and everybody will be in position if they have one person to make contact with the local business.

In this chapter, themes and sub-themes generated from the focus group focused on the fact what motivated these international female students to come to the United States to study in graduate level, what kind of adjustment difficulties they encounter academically and socio-culturally, how they coped with those situations, and lastly what they think the university can do in order to facilitate their adjustment problems.

Chapter V

Discussion, Implications, and Future Research

The purpose of this study was to find out the perceptions of the adjustment experiences of the international female graduate students studying at an urban university in the United States. The research questions that the study sought to investigate were: why international female graduate students decided to come to the United States to study, what were the problems international female graduate students encounter during their stay in the United States, how did international female graduate students handle those problems, and what did international female graduate students think the university can do in order to facilitate their problems.

In order to have an understanding of the participants' experiences, a focus group interview was conducted. The interviews were transcribed, and the data were analyzed. Brief summaries of the demographic information about the participants were also offered. For the purpose of the analysis data were categorized using themes that emerged from the focus group interviews. Common themes that emerged from the data were: decision-making, language, discrimination, ignorance, coping strategies, and future suggestions. In this chapter data are discussed and interpreted within the context of the purposes and questions of this study. Data are also examined in light of prior research findings.

International Female graduate Students' Decisions to Come to the United States

For most part international female graduate students in this study come to the United states because their aspirations reach a level at which they can not be satisfied by local opportunities. According to Davis (1997) many international students choose to study in the

United States because their home country's educational systems are too elite or too small to allow them to choose their fields of study. Comments from participants also indicated that graduate study in the United States is perceived to be the best by them and their home government or universities. This part of the findings of this study is also confirmed by Isaac et al. (1995). According to Isaac et al. (1995) graduate education in United States is well-established, with a history that dates back over 100 years and that has become arguably the finest in the world.

Problems Experienced by International Female Graduate Students

International female graduate students in this study reported having problems in three major areas during their stay in the United States: lack of proficiency in English language, discrimination, and lack of knowledge of American people about other cultures and countries.

Language

The importance of adequate language skills can not be overemphasized for the international female graduate students whose native language is not English and who as graduate students have to defend their views in class discussions, as teaching assistants, have to teach classes, as interns, need to counsel advisee. Participants in this study reported fluency in English language as a major problem. They reported having difficulties in expressing themselves and as a result did not attempt to participate in class discussion. They also had difficulties understanding class lecture. This results in academic performance which is below the participants' ability. Participants' comments indicate that English language skill is very important in integrating to American culture, in being understood by the American professors and students and understand them as well. This finding confirms previous studies (Meloni, 1986; Sharma, 1973; Xia, 1992)

who reported the difficulties experienced by international students because of the lack of English proficiency.

Discrimination

Discrimination is another difficulty that international female graduate students in this study encounter during their stay in the United States both socially and educationally. Participants reported that they felt they were being discriminated against by faculty members, fellow students, administrators, as well as people they met in other formal and informal settings. There seemed to be a misunderstanding about the conception of "discrimination" among the participants. This may indicate that being foreigner, participants in this study are not very familiar with the concept of what discrimination is and when the act of discrimination is being exercised. However, comments from participants indicated that they felt they were being discriminated against because of their lack of language proficiency, their foreignness, and also because they are from underdeveloped countries. This part of the findings of this study confirmed the findings from previous studies (Perkins et al., 1977; Collins, 1984) that reported that one of the socio-cultural problems encountered by international students is being discriminated against. Demographic information about the participants suggested that the participants whose duration of stay in the United States is less than three years, reported more about being discriminated against. The participants whose duration of stay in the United States is more than five years, reported less about being discrminated. This may indicate that the longer the participants stay in the United states, the more they learn to how to handle the situation when the participant feel that they are being discriminated against. This finding is inconsistent with Lysgaard's (1955) U curve hypothesis that suggests that adjustment as a process over time seems to follow a U-shaped curve.

Ignorance

International female graduate students in this study reported that American people lack adequate knowledge about other people, cultures, and countries outside of America. As a result, according to the participants in this study, American people hold biased opinions about other cultures and they discriminate against students from other countries based on their superficial knowledge.. This may mean that there is a need for multi-cultural awareness programs for all graduate students. Typically, undergraduate students have been the focus of most multi-cultural programs (Globetti, et al., 1991). This finding suggests that the graduate student population should not be overlooked in multi-cultural programming since they are becoming more diverse, especially in terms of international and female students (Globetti, et al., 1991).

Coping Strategies Adopted by International Female Graduate Students

The ability of international female graduate students in this study to cope with the changes in their life styles and adapting to a different environment and culture depends on individuals. The participants of this study reported that in order to survive their stay in the United States, they tried to handle their problems by themselves as well as they looked for support from others. They tried to find out which systems worked best for them and used them to handle their situations. Discrimination is handled by these participants silently, trying to minimize the negative effect, lack of adequate knowledge of American people about other cultures is handled by explaining to them about the differences between cultures. When faced with accent problems, participants in this study tried to write down what they were saying in order to make other people understand them. This finding is confirmed by previous studies (Yeung, 1980; Xia, 1992) who reported that

international students look for different sources for help in order to handle their adjustment problems self, professors, and friends.

International Female Graduate Students' Suggestions for the University of New Orleans Regarding Their Adjustment Problems

When asked about what the university can offer in order to help facilitate participants' adjustment problems, respondents offered several suggestions. The responses reflected each participant's concerns about what they thought was most critical for them. Suggestions included: accent issues, interaction between American students and international students, understanding of the faculty members about international students' limitations, and discussion among international students to share their experiences. Participants felt that all of these issues should be addressed by the policy makers in order to help international female graduate students adjust to their new environments.

Implications of Leadership

This study has attempted to investigate the problems that international female graduate students encounter during their stay. It also gives some insight into how these international female graduate students go about resolving these problems in order to reach their goals. The importance of this study is two-fold. First, it enables some other female international graduate students to articulate what is important to them and what areas they consider troublesome and would like help in. Secondly, the information can be helpful to college student personnel and professors who work with international students. The findings can provide the faculty members and the student personnel of the university with information about the different kinds of problems that international female graduate students encounter during their stay in the United States. It may also

help them with the strategic planning regarding the coping mechanism of international female graduate students for implementation. Being sensitive to the problems of the international female graduate students, professors, and other student personnel can be more helpful to international female graduate students as they engage in the process of adjustment to their new life in the United States. This will also help the student personnel staff to create a climate that would nurture and enhance international understanding and promote interaction.

Future Research

This study was conducted with a very small sample. For broader understanding of this phenomena, it is necessary to conduct a study with a larger sample. This study was conducted with the population of international female graduate students. Similar studies with other populations (e.g., male international graduate students, American female graduate students) can be conducted. This would help compare and contrast whether male international graduate students as well as American female graduate students have similar problems and how they handle their problems. This study specifically targets the University of New Orleans. For greater application, a more extensive study with a larger sample of international female graduate students attending different types of institutions (e.g., public, private, community college) located in different areas of the country could be conducted. Also a comparative study can be conducted to investigate what types of adjustment problems international students encounter in institutions with higher, as well as lower, percentage of international students.

Concluding Thoughts

The focus group discussion used in this study was very enriching and rewarding. Enriching in that it made me hear these participants' adjustment experiences, which would not have come

through had conventional methods been used. Rewarding in that by listening to what these participants had to say made me reevaluate my own life, what are specific issues that are difficult for me, and how do I handle those difficulties.

All these participants face problems during their sojourn. The problems basically dealt with adjusting and adapting to new culture and environment. The focus group highlighted that when faced with problems, these participants try to handle their problems by taking measures which worked for them best. But these participants also think that the faculty and staff of the university can contribute for the betterment of the international female graduate students which might help facilitate their adjustment problems.

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APPENDIX A
Consent Form

Title of the Study

International Female Graduate Students' Perceptions of Their Adjustment Experiences and Coping Strategies at the University of New Orleans.

Project Director

Nasrin Fatima, Graduate Student, Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling, and Foundations, ED 348, University of New Orleans, New Orleans, LA 70148. Telephone: (504) 280-6661.

Purpose

The purpose of this research study is to understand the adjustment experiences of international female graduate students.

Procedures

The procedures involves one individual interview session of about 45- 60 minute. The interview session will be audio-taped. Participant is free to choose which topics to discuss, may refuse to answer any questions, and may stop the interview at any time.

Potential Risks or Discomforts

To my knowledge, this study involves no potential risks or discomforts. If you wish to discuss these or any other discomforts you may experience, you may call the Project Director listed in #2 of this form.

Potential Benefits to You or Others

There is little research about the adjustment experiences of international female graduate students. The results of this study can be used to design international student development programs to meet the needs of future international female graduate students.

Alternative Procedures

There are no alternative procedures. Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you may withdraw consent and terminate participation at any time without consequence.

Protection of Confidentiality

The names of all participants be kept confidential at all times. Participants' name will not be identified on the tape. The interview tapes will be transcribed the Project Director. The signed consent forms, audiotapes, interview transcripts, and any other materials related to this project will be maintained in a secure and confidential manner by the Project Director. If the results of this study are published, participants' names will be disguised.

Signatures and Consent to Participate

I have been fully informed of the above-described procedure with its possible benefits and risks, and I have given my permission to participate in this study.

Signature of the Participant	Name of the Participant (Print)	Date
Signature of the Project Director	Name of the project Director (Print)	Date

APPENDIX B
Description of Protocol

1. Title

International Female Graduate Students' Perceptions of Their Adjustment Experiences and Coping Strategies at the University of New Orleans.

2. Investigator

Nasrin Fatima (Doctoral Student, Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling, and Foundations, University of New Orleans).

3. Introduction

Although graduate school is often difficult for both men and women, factors such as increased role strain, gender role socialization, and gender-based discrimination may combine to make graduate school especially stressful for some women (Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992). A campus-wide survey of graduate students also found that women reported significantly higher levels of negative life changes and symptoms of psychological distress and were twice as likely as were men to report problems balancing time commitments (Mallinckrodt et al., 1989). For international student it is even more challenging. In addition to these difficulties, international students, both men and women, who come to study in the United States for higher education are often faced with the need to adjust to a variety of cultural, social, personal as well as academic changes (Dillard & Chisolm, 1983; Schram & Lauver, 1988). In fact, the experience of being an international student in the United States is frequently a difficult one, involving periods of isolation and loneliness (Hull, 1984). The purpose of this study is to investigate international female graduate students' perception of their adjustment problems and coping strategies at the University of New Orleans.

4. Participant

The present study will use qualitative methods, such as, open-ended interviews and narrative stories, and focus group discussion as data collection sources. The samples will be randomly selected from the women international graduate population at the University of New Orleans. The criteria for selection for all subjects is that they have not previously lived in or visited the United States for more than two weeks before they came to study in the United States; they are not nationals of the European Union; and they are not native English speakers. Subjects' duration of stay in the United States may vary from one year to five years.

5. Justification for Using This Particular Population

The study seeks to obtain information about the problems encountered by the international female graduate students at the University of New Orleans and how they deal with these situations. Using this population is, therefore, imperative.

6. Subject Recruitment Procedures

Subjects will be recruited from UNO international female students who are currently enrolled either in doctoral or masters program in different schools. Negotiations with the Director of the Office of International Students and Scholars (OISS) at UNO will be conducted in order to access to the targeted population. Participation is entirely voluntary.

7. General experimental Procedure

Individual interview sessions will be conducted either at UNO, or at any convenient place recommended by the participants. Each interview session may last from forty five minutes to one hour. Focus group discussions will also be held either at UNO, or at any other convenient place agreed upon by the participants. The focus group discussions may last from one hour to one an half hour. Refreshments will be provided on every event.

8. Procedures for Obtaining Consent

Interviewees will be invited to participate on a voluntary basis; before each interview or discussion session, they will be asked to read and sign the attached consent form.

9. Discussion of Anonymity, Confidentiality, Handling of Data

All the interviews and group discussions will be conducted in undisclosed place. The names of all participants will be kept confidential. The signed consent forms, audiotapes, interview transcripts, and any other materials related to this project will be maintained in a secure and confidential manner by the Project Director. Audio tapes will be deleted after the completion of the study.

10. Debriefing Procedures

Letters will be mailed to each participants thanking them for their voluntary participation in the study and informing them about the nature of the study and their performance after the completion of the study.

11. Potential Risks

There is no known risks associated with participation in this study.

12. References

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APPENDIX C
Letter of Introduction

Dear International Female Graduate Student:

I am a doctoral student in Higher Education Administration at the University of New Orleans. Currently I am in the process of collecting data for my pre-dissertation. The topic of my pre-dissertation is "International Female Graduate Students' Perception of Their Adjustment Problems and Coping Strategies at the University of New Orleans". Data collection of this study will be in the form of focus group interview.

The purpose of this study is to identify is to identify problems experienced by international female graduate students and strategies used to cope with those problems. I request your participation in this study. The result of this study may lead to the development of programs to assist international female graduate students in dealing with their problems.

I will be contacting you by phone within the next few days to schedule an appointment. If you have any questions about the study, please feel free to call me at 280-3751 (home), or 280-6661 (office).

I look forward to talking with you.

Sincerely,

Nasrin Fatima

APPENDIX D
Demographic Information of Participants

Participant	Country of Origin	Academic Major	Length of Stay	Age	Marital Status
Lena	Bangladesh	Business	1 Year 3 Months	37	Married, no children
Diana	Venezuela	Education	2 years 4 months	38	Married, two children
Tina	Cameroon	Business	8 years	36	Married, three children
Emna	Taiwan	Education	7 years	29	Single, no children